

## Remembering Irving Howe

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escrow we reached into our own meager pockets for later mailings.) In January 1954 we published our first issue. It was immediately attacked, from the right (especially in a long review in *Commentary*) and from the left, and all of a sudden we had a reputation. And writers. Silone wrote, Harold Rosenberg wrote, Paul Goodman, Erich Fromm, Norman Mailer, and the greatest coup of all, "On Socialist Realism," by someone named Tertz, who, we later discovered, was the great Russian dissident, Sinyavsky. Add Henry Pachter, George Lichtheim, Ben Seligman—we had writers. And we had Irving, who wrote for almost every issue of the magazine until, until—it's hard to get it out—he died, having first faced the torment of three operations and a prolonged stay in the hospital. But he recovered, and began to write as well as ever. Until . . .

Operating on a shoestring, we all did double duty. Irving would come by my home in the Village, help dummy up the galley proofs—in the days of "hot metal" one did that. We would walk around, always stopping at the 8th St. Bookshop, and move *Dissent* to a prominent position, along with whatever book of Irving's had been published. Irving loved to walk and talk. And that we did. Our editors will surely be impatient. Manny, bring it to an end. What end? How? Had I gone first, Irving would surely have

written something more graceful. So where do I go from here?

Well, there was a private funeral service before the big memorial service at the 92nd St. Y, for a few friends and family. No one could speak easily. There were pauses lasting five minutes, it seemed, between speakers. Irving's son, Nick, spoke to those present: You were the voices Irving heard most! A few looked at me. Of those present, he had heard my voice most often. So I rose and said something like: In the last year or so, when Irving—already ill—felt the intimations of mortality, he would worry about what would happen to *Dissent*. I replied frivolously: since I'm older, I'm likely to die first and all I ask is that you make a short speech. But, should you go first, I promise a short speech. And this is it. End.

And now I've written more than I wanted to, breaking a kind of promise. This much I know, *Dissent* will go on. We have new (and many "old") editors and it will continue to be an excellent periodical, even if it remains the cottage industry it always was. Most of all, I recall Irving's last article on the validity of a utopian vision. It reasserts his principal commitment (in an article written long ago with Coser) that democratic "socialism is the name of our desire." Finally, there is an end to weeping, but treasured memories remain.

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### Robert Heilbroner

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**I**t is very difficult to write about someone much celebrated, much admired, much mourned. I will content myself with this small anecdote.

A good friend was visiting one day when the mail came, bringing a letter from Irving in which he praised in lovely words a book manuscript I had shown him. I passed the letter over to my friend. "My God!" he said. "From Irving Howe! You must be ecstatic."

"Oh, I don't know," I said. "When you get to be my age, you have read enough comments not to take them too seriously. The bad ones you shrug off, the good ones you apply a knowing discount to. Knowing Irving, I doubt if I'll read this letter more than two or three hundred times."

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### Mitch Horowitz

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**I** had been looking forward to hearing Irving Howe's speech all week. At last April's Socialist Scholar's Conference he was part of a closing panel; I knew his address would be short and probably without notes—but the chance to hear him speak was a small treasure.

He walked in looking very pale and, as it always seemed, dressed too warmly for such a sunny spring day. I knew that, like me, others present were wondering whether to say hello. There were times when approaching Irving felt a little like what Michael Harrington described when he wrote of his

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own awe around Willy Brandt: "It is hard to discuss the weather with someone who, morally and historically, is twenty feet tall."

One participant on the stage had recently written an unkind and inaccurate attack on Irving's politics. Irving shook the man's hand and assured the audience that the panelists would "more or less" be in agreement. For all his reputed "prickliness," who at such times could be more gracious? He went on to talk painfully of the corruption scandals shaking the European social democrats—couldn't we socialists expect at least a little more from them? And certainly it was *them*—the other guys—whom he meant. It's been since that speech and Irving's death that I've learned in my gut what I've always known in my head: that he was not a social democrat with a loyal penchant for socialist language. As true as Luxemburg, Kautsky, Bernstein, Debs, or Thomas, Irving was a socialist and an opponent—not a modifier—of a capitalist order he saw as marred by personal limits and social cruelty. He exhorted the crowd to keep alive the flames of a democratic utopianism, to exercise one's "moral imagination."

After Irving finished there were the usual

embarrassing disruptions from sect members. Calmly—and with some humor—Irving responded to the tumult. He concluded the question period by wryly congratulating one yeller who insisted that he'd been investigated by the FBI and recommending that the man read Lenin's *Left-wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder*.

But, more important, he urged the listeners not to fall into the delusion that Western democracy was somehow a fraud. This was a man who had witnessed the resulting horrors when civil, electoral democracy was disrupted in the name of mobilizing "the people." In the name of causes supposedly greater than free speech, Irving had witnessed the flames.

Irving brought wisdom and complexity into a movement too often marred by dogma and sophistry. He reminded us again and again of the fruits of steady, clear thought and of a utopianism that understood the pains of history. And in just his very presence at such events, he taught us how to maintain our principles in a discouraging movement at a troubling time. Who will teach us these things now? Did we learn them well enough to survive and pass them on? Goodbye our teacher and comrade—I can only pray that we have.

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## Nicholas Howe

**M**y father moved in a world of stories. He told his own in *World of Our Fathers* and *A Margin of Hope*; he wrote about those of Faulkner and Hardy, Anderson and Wharton, Dreiser and Sholom Aleichem, Leskov and George Eliot, T.E. Lawrence and Pirandello, Delmore Schwartz and Raymond Carver, Tolstoy and Umberto Saba—the list amazes as much for its diversity as its length. With Ilana, he collected the shortest of stories and together they made an anthology—*Short Shorts*—unlike any ever done: one that could satisfy his belief that very few pieces would not be better if cut by 20 percent. With this love of stories, he welcomed my wife, Georgina, into the family, surprised but always delighted to have a novelist for a daughter-in-law.

His love of stories, his hope that he might make some sense of the world through them, gives me a way of talking about his complexity and yet also his simplicity as a man and writer. So let me tell you a story about him, a story that helps me understand the wholeness of his life's work. In the fall of 1986 he came to visit me in Oklahoma and we took a road trip to the Wichita Mountains, about two hours southwest of Norman, where I then lived. These mountains rise

up from a prairie that matches the mind's-eye view of Oklahoma: flat, dry, windswept, treed with a scattering of cottonwood and blackjack oak. These mountains are part of a wildlife refuge that has, among other animals, a vast herd of buffalo; in an irony my father found delicious, these buffalo descend from a few that had been shipped out to Oklahoma in 1905 from the Bronx Zoo. As we sat in the November sun eating sandwiches and drinking coffee, my father talked of the landscape and the way its hard vastness evoked fundamental qualities of American life. If he seemed out of place there in his city clothes and his New York quickness, the place itself was not alien to him; it had for years been part of his imaginative landscape. After lunch, we drove deeper into the Wichitas and visited Holy City, a stage set made from native red granite where the locals put on a passion play each Easter. For the rest of the year, the Stations of the Cross stand gaunt and eerie against the blue Oklahoma sky. The story of the place tells of an emigré Austrian pastor who was sent out to tend the souls of Indians and who came to feel, in a moment of hallucinatory loneliness, that the landscape of the Wichitas bore an exact resemblance to that of Judea.